



Dawn of Infamy: A Sunken Ship, a Vanished Crew, and the Final Mystery of Pearl Harbor by Stephen Harding.

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Published to coincide with the seventy-fifth anniversary of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, *Dawn of Infamy*¹ concerns the sinking of the US Army Transport *Cynthia Olson* by a Japanese submarine minutes after the first Japanese naval aviators began their assault on Pearl Harbor. After radioing a distress call, the crew of the *Cynthia Olson* abandoned ship some 1,100 miles northeast of Hawaii, then disappeared without a trace. Military historian Stephen Harding² focuses on their fate and the question of whether their SOS call could have alerted US forces in Hawaii of the impending Japanese attack. The book's engaging storyline will appeal to both nonspecialists and military historians with an interest in the early years of the Pacific War. Its narrative style and subject matter evoke nautical adventure books like Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm*³ and Nathaniel Philbrick's *In the Heart of the Sea*.⁴

The first of the book's two parts details the design and construction of the *Cynthia Olson* in a Wisconsin shipyard, its various owners, officers and crew, and long career as a bulk cargo carrier. The Army chartered the vessel to carry lumber to Hawaii, manned by a civilian crew and two enlisted soldiers (a radio operator and a medic). Part I culminates in the sinking of the ship on the morning of 7 December 1941, by the submarine *I-26*, captained by Cdr. Minoru Yokota of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN).

Part II addresses unanswered questions about the *Cynthia Olson*: did its sinking occur *before* the attack on Pearl Harbor began? If so, could the SOS transmitted by its radio operator have alerted US forces to the impending attack? And what happened to its thirty-five crewmen after the *I-26* fired a warning shot across its bow and Commander Yokota permitted them to abandon ship in a pair of lifeboats?

Building on previous examinations of the sinking of the *Cynthia Olson* by journalists and military historians, Harding concludes that, since the *I-26* attacked its eight minutes *after* the air strike on Pearl Harbor began, its distress call could not have alerted US forces at Pearl Harbor in time and would likely have been disregarded in any case. A US Navy destroyer had sunk a (presumably) Japanese mini-submarine at the entrance to Pearl Harbor an hour before the Japanese attack began. If that incident did not trigger an alert, Harding argues, it is doubtful a distress call

1. Orig. published in Great Britain as *Voyage to Oblivion: A Sunken Ship, a Vanished Crew and the Final Mystery of Pearl Harbor* (Stroud, UK: Amberley, 2010).

2. He is editor-in-chief of *Military History* magazine and author of the bestselling *The Last Battle: When U.S. and German Soldiers Joined Forces in the Waning Hours of World War II in Europe* (Philadelphia: Da Capo, 2013) and, more recently, *Last to Die: A Defeated Empire, a Forgotten Mission, and the Last American Killed in World War II* (Boston: Da Capo, 2015) and *The Castaway's War: One Man's Battle against Imperial Japan* (Boston: Da Capo, 2016).

3. Subtitle: *A True Story of Men against the Sea* (NY: Norton, 1997).

4. Subtitle: *The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (NY: Viking, 2000).

from a freighter 1,100 miles from Hawaii would have done so either. As for the missing crewmen, Harding contends that prevailing winds and currents carried their drifting open lifeboats out into the Pacific, where they perished from thirst and exposure.

The author admits that many details about the sinking of the *Cynthia Olson* remain unknown and unknowable. The ship's log and other documents went down with the ship, and pertinent IJN submarine records did not survive the war; key radio logs from ships that received the *Cynthia Olson*'s distress call were destroyed as well. Thus, Harding has relied on such alternative sources as the logs of the HMCS *Prince Robert*, which had searched unsuccessfully for the missing crewmen, and previous writers' interviews with Commander Yokota and his chief gunner, Warrant Officer Saburo Hayashi,⁵ who survived the war against all odds. Working with these less-than-ideal sources, Harding has produced a vivid, unsparring account of the final days of the *Cynthia Olson*'s crew.

Exposed in the open-top boats to the North Pacific's notoriously changeable December weather, ... [the crew] would have been battered by the sea and baked by the sun, alternately shivering and sweating. Those who may have been injured in *I-26*'s attack—flesh torn open by shrapnel, perhaps, or limbs broken in the rush to escape their doomed ship—would have suffered more than their shipmates, but almost certainly not longer. As infection or gangrene or blood loss weakened them, the wounded or injured would have perished, their bodies committed to the deep by those who survived them. And as fresh water and emergency rations dwindled, even those who entered the boats in good health would have begun to weaken. Hoping every minute to sight a plume of smoke on the horizon or the glint of sun off a metal wing, the mariners would have died slowly of starvation or dehydration. Or if they were lucky, perhaps death came suddenly in the shape of a crushing wave or, for the older men, a heart attack that ended all misery in a blessed moment. (188–89)

Regarding his choice of subject, Harding suggests that the well publicized story of the *Cynthia Olson* resonated powerfully with the American public, which could more easily take in the loss of a single freighter and its thirty-five crewmen than the overwhelming carnage at Pearl Harbor. And, too, many Americans feared the specter of Japanese submarines operating off their country's own West Coast more than IJN warplanes attacking distant Hawaii.

Stephen Harding's gripping new book⁶ broadens our understanding of how the Japanese submarine fleet supported the assault on Pearl Harbor and attacked US shipping between Hawaii and the mainland in the minutes, hours, and days following the devastating air strike on the US Pacific Fleet. It also convincingly resolves any lingering questions about the sinking of the *Cynthia Olson* and the fate of its crew.

5. See Bert Webber, *Silent Siege: Japanese Attacks against North America in World War II* (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Pr, 1984).

6. One quibble: its thirty pages of endnotes contain pertinent material that should have been folded into the body of the book itself.